

■ SPIES AS NEWSMEN

The 'Information Digest' Ploy

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Once again police informers are very much in the news. They range from Gary Rowe, now accused of participating in the Ku Klux Klan violence he reported on, to Robert Byers, who in 1974 tipped off the FBI to an alleged conspiracy behind the death of Martin Luther King. Atty. Gen. Griffin Bell refuses to identify sixteen informers and risks a jail stay for contempt of court.

Yet one informer case, which could have a devastating effect on our civil liberties, has gone almost ignored in the mass media. It involves John and S. Louise Rees, a husband-and-wife team who in the early 1970s provided police with some of their most damaging information on Washington, D.C.'s anti-war movement.

Like such better-known infiltrators as Tommy the Traveler and Boyd Douglas, famous for his connection with the Harrisburg Eight, the Reeses misled the Left as to their political sentiments, spoke provocatively of violent revolution and consistently distorted what they passed on to the police. But except for those characteristics of their trade, the Reeses did not fit the standard informer mold. During their most productive period, they were not employed by any one agency in order to crack any one specific group. Instead, they worked as what might be called free-lance agents, worming their way into a number of New Left organizations. Even more atypically, they disseminated their espionage through a mimeographed, biweekly newsletter, *Information Digest*. Such federal agencies as the IRS, Drug Enforcement Administration and National Security Agency received copies, along with state and local police throughout the nation. In many documented cases, any name listed in *ID* automatically found its way into special police files on subversive activities.

This journalistic ploy has emerged as the Reeses' major defense in the early stages of civil suits brought by the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS) and the National Lawyers Guild (NLG)—two groups compromised by the Reeses' subterfuge. (Both groups are also seeking damages for illegal surveillance by government intelligence agencies.) Claiming First Amendment rights, John Rees has refused in deposition to reveal the sources of his articles—sources which the plaintiffs charge were purloined documents and confidences.

This Rees invention—along with considerable assistance from ultraconservative Rep. Lawrence McDonald (D., Ga.)—is a dangerous assault on legal,

if unorthodox, political activity in this nation.

As far as anyone knew in the spring of 1971, John Seeley and Sheila O'Connor (as the Reeses were then known) were fringe radicals of a familiar sort. Long-haired and bearded, with a portly frame and cheery British accent, John eagerly spouted Maoist rhetoric and dropped names like Mark Rudd, Jerry Rubin and the New York Crazies. Sheila, also heavy and more than 6 feet tall, towered above her companion. An intimidating, outspoken advocate of women's rights, she was unembarrassed about her lesbian connections and, when she showed up in Washington to join her boyfriend, spoke proudly of the paralegal work she had done in New York for Roy Lucas, who later successfully pleaded the Jane Doe abortion case before the Supreme Court.

John Rees, who opened a radical bookstore, the Redhouse, was among the founders of the People's Coalition for Peace and Justice and took part in planning for the 1971 May Day demonstration. The IBM typewriter and mimeograph machine in his store were always available to run off movement pamphlets.

John and Sheila were conspicuously demonstrative during the May Day protests, so it seemed natural for them to gravitate toward a group, headed by Rennie Davis, that was preparing for the expected mass indictments. A large house was rented at 1616 Longfellow, N.W. for the legal defense team. Then, in September, when it became apparent that the federal prosecutors wouldn't act, the house was dedicated as a collective to study grand juries.

The couple was accepted as tenants and soon dominated the household. That fall, 1616 Longfellow became the social center for Washington's radical community. A fixture at conferences held by the IPS (a left-wing think tank), John freely offered the house for parties and meetings. Since it had eight bedrooms and a rapid turnover of tenants, the place also became a favorite stopover for movement groups or individuals spending a few nights in Washington. Among those guests was William Kunstler, the radical lawyer, who recently found a distorted account of one of his visits in his FBI dossier. Looking back he says, "There may have been other houses where you could have stayed, but this one seemed almost domestic: furnished and clean; always good for a meal and a bed. And at the time, John and Sheila seemed like exceptionally warm and hospitable people."

One of the other tenants at 1616 Longfellow was a law student who joined the National Lawyers Guild in February 1972 and paved the way for Sheila's membership. Working as a volunteer in the woefully understaffed chapter office, Sheila quickly took control of routine operations. According to Len Cavise, a Guild lawyer working out of a desk there, "She was absolutely indefatigable, with endless energy for the most meaningless task." She reorganized files, typed minutes, updated the ever-expanding donors' and membership lists, accompanied Guild lawyers to consultations to take notes and enlarged the chapter's news-

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letter from 2 pages to 12.

The Reeses' reputations were so well established in the Left community that even when they suddenly disappeared in June of 1973, no one came close to guessing why. Their real identities and the true nature of their involvement were not revealed until 1975, when a New York State Assembly investigator, Tom Burton, linked them to *ID*, so often cited as a "classified source" in New York State police files. Then their former friends discovered, by flipping through copies of *ID*, that during the time when they seemed such eager participants in anti-war activities, the Reeses were characterizing the peace movement as violently subversive or at least Communist, revealing its strategies, stealing confidential lists and easily misconstrued internal documents. Even more damaging was the disclosure of movement legal plans before important trials. In one case the Reeses leaked the courtroom strategy for a 1971 civil suit brought by prisoners at the Lorton, Va. penitentiary; in another, *ID* printed a precise outline of political actions designed to synchronize with the government's showcase prosecution of the Harrisburg Eight.

Understandably outraged and embarrassed by the Reeses' betrayal, movement people now wonder whether they should have spotted them for what they were. Many believe that the earliest warning signal was a dispute involving one Pat Richartz, the original tenant of 1616 Longfellow. When it was discovered that some movement money was missing, she searched the Reeses' room and found a cache of weapons and what she took to be wiretap equipment. Caught in the act, Richartz was beaten severely by Sheila. Subsequently the Reeses claimed that she had embezzled movement money. Few chose to believe Richartz and she soon left for California.

Suspicious might also have been raised by John's provocative talk of violence. He had a predilection for such groups as the Black Panthers and Young Lords and often had members to the house. The Reeses mentioned weapons they kept in their home and car, and one day Sheila created a stir in the Guild office when she flashed a pistol from her pocketbook.

Another mystery surrounding the Reeses during

their time at 1616 Longfellow was the source of their income. The bookstore soon failed and Sheila never accepted a salary for her work at the Guild office. Their story was that their money came from fraudulent fund raising. Many mornings, as early as 6 o'clock, John would set off wearing a rumpled suit, black shirt and white clerical collar. The ruse, he'd say, was that he was raising funds for orphanages in Rhodesia, and he'd spend days at a time working gullible church groups. As one Guild member recalls, "John considered himself the expert when it came to scams." He often bragged about his collection of unpaid hotel bills, and shortly before they disappeared, the Reeses stuck the NLG with the tab for their stay at an Austin, Texas hotel during a national convention. They also kept the car they drove to Texas, having forged the chapter president's name to the rental papers.

Apparently the police were on to John's scams. After he told Chicago police of a conspiracy to kill Roy Wilkins at the 1968 Democratic Convention, a file was opened on him in the department's subversives section. A report there begins with the comment, "A cursory investigation indicates that Rees is at least a 'confidence man' type who possesses all of the unreliable characteristics associated with such a person."

The earliest available details of Rees's life tend to confirm that estimate of his character. Appearing before HUAC in 1968, John testified that in England he had served in the RAF as a Special Provost Marshal observing "mob and extremist movements," and after his discharge in 1954 had worked as a Fleet Street reporter. Actually, the police found, he was a shipping clerk with the rank of corporal in the RAF and performed much the same job for the newspaper. Setting off for the United States in 1963 on a fraudulently obtained ticket, he left behind two broken marriages and five children. Within a year, he made headlines as the deathbed heir of a five-month acquaintance, Grace Metalious, author of *Peyton Place*. He later renounced his claim when the estate proved worthless. The police report doesn't place him in the public spotlight again until 1967,



when he emerged as a close associate of Newark Mayor Hugh Addonizio and Police Director Dominick Spina. He was the city's research director for a CETA "New Careers Program" until the Department of Labor discovered that, against government regulations, Rees had another job—as vice president, along with Spina, of a private company, National Goals Incorporated (NGI), which was tied closely to the local Democratic machine.

Ostensibly a consulting firm for prison and police officers, NGI failed to land a single contract. *Information Digest* first appeared under its auspices, and shortly thereafter was all that remained of the company, with Rees in sole command. His only other assistance came from his future wife, whom he met a year later while monitoring a Columbia University demonstration.

From the first issue of *ID* in October 1968, Rees made it clear that his newsletter was meant for a select few, and depended on their cooperation. "If you don't receive any more material," *ID* warns, "you'll know that you have forgotten to send on information." The content would have been useless to any but law-enforcement officials and blacklists. (Rees has contributed material to the publication of the National Church League, a reactionary blacklisting foundation, and in 1969 and 1970 he was listed as its managing editor.) Most articles were little more than compilations of names and, in some cases, of license plates of cars parked outside a meeting hall. Promising at first to concentrate on the Black Panthers and SDS because other militants looked to "their radical leadership," Rees ends up freely associating any left-wing group with violent revolutionaries, especially since he found moderate organizations easier to penetrate than the truly militant, tightly knit cadres.

Assuming a limited readership, Rees festoons his newsletters with such warnings as, "SENSITIVE: Do not disseminate in this form." He never includes a masthead and gives only the subscription fee (now \$300 a year) and a post office box for communications. In a November 1971 issue he addresses a note to "the forty people now receiving the *Information Digest*," and explains that "three people have been removed from our mailing list" for disseminating information that compromised "two sources." He adds that if *ID* material must be disseminated, "please do not use it in *ID* format—scramble and rewrite." In a later issue he printed a list of "celebrity" fund raisers for radical causes which had been confiscated from Pat Richartz. His preface actually admits it was gained in "a radical eviction" and the list concludes with a note assuring readers that "every attempt was made to restore the list to its owner, without success, as it is realized that under certain circumstances the publishing of stolen lists is illegal."

Despite Rees's shady background, the evidence is that, as in New York, the state police in Michigan, Maryland, New Hampshire and Pennsylvania took *ID* seriously. A Chicago group found four entire issues of the newsletter integrated into dossiers

subpoenaed from the CIA's domestic files. The New York State police sent one report based on *ID* material to Florida authorities; it later cost the subject a civil service job. Since government agencies on all levels freely share information, the harm done to other individuals wrongly smeared as subversives by *Information Digest* cannot be calculated.

Police did more for Rees than read *ID*. In 1971 the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) paid the rent for the Redhouse, and for a few weeks before May Day rented—and bugged—an office into which Rees was to lure unsuspecting movement leaders. Maryland state police helped him secure a post office box for *ID* communications and provided a front address to put on the application. Oddly enough, for some eighteen months after she dropped out of the radical community, the FBI paid Louise Rees as an informer.

In a recent interview, John denied any relationship with the police beyond that of writer/reader. And despite FBI testimony to the contrary, he insists that his wife was never a paid informer. He argues that they couldn't even be called voluntary informers. "We never told them anything that we didn't print later in the *Digest*. Of course," he adds, "if I had any warning of some future criminal action, I'd have to tell them; otherwise I'd be a co-conspirator." As for the MPD's paying rent for his bookstore, John explains that the payment was merely "a personal loan from the deputy chief which I never managed to pay back."

Rees has similarly bland explanations for security concerns expressed in *ID*. He claims that he had no intention of restricting public access to his newsletter (in ten years the readership has ballooned to 150). Instead, he says, he was worried about excessive mimeographing, especially of material already sold in that form to other magazines. He cites one story on subversives' corporate targets as having gone to *Barron's*. However he can't specify either the issue in which it appeared or the editor with whom he dealt (no one at *Barron's* remembers him). *ID* has no masthead, he says, because "that's chauvinistic." He claims that the newsletter has always been copyrighted, but the Copyright Office has no record that Rees ever made an application, and a "copyright" notice doesn't appear on the cover of *Information Digest* until 1977, the year Rees first learned he'd be called in the IPS suit.

Rees makes no apologies for his information-gathering techniques. "Why must you say 'infiltrate?'" he asks. "We were reporting. And we didn't use 'aliases'; we used pen names." As he remembers Washington, information was practically thrust upon him and Louise. "After they heard about all the wonderful work Louise did with Roy Lucas and abortion rights in New York City, the National Lawyers Guild almost begged her to work in their chapter office." (Actually, Lucas doesn't recall Louise as anything more than a competent typist whose work, at most, was secretarial.)

In the event that he loses his First Amendment

argument ("I'm not an informer, I'm a journalist"), Rees has a second line of defense, developed with the help of Congressman McDonald. Rees has sworn in deposition that he donated all of his IPS-related notes and documents to McDonald's office in 1975, and that those files are now a matter of Congressional privilege. McDonald also provides the bulk of the Reeses' income by employing Louise as a \$16,000 a year research assistant. The youngest member on the National Council of the John Birch Society and sponsor of a bill to re-establish the House Internal Security Committee (which has the support of 177 other members), McDonald has been friendly with John Rees ever since the Englishman first moved into America's right-wing politics.

Movement members, familiar with the Reeses and their connections to Congress, law-enforcement agencies and the hard-core right wing, see their activities as further evidence of a malevolent network in government bent on curtailing left-wing politics. But a matter for equal concern is the extent to which the Reeses acted as independent intelligence entrepreneurs. Government has only begun to regulate the investigating techniques of its own employees and has yet to tackle the problem of private-sector intelligence. This disregard for the civilian side of surveillance is most evident in the final New York State Assembly report on the state police files. Although a significant amount of the material in those files was attributed to *Information Digest*, the report never attempts to describe the people behind *ID* or the nature of its contents. The New York State police may have had no part in initiating John Rees's actions, but their data bank is chock full of his special brand of information. They accepted *ID* as reliable, and confidential, source material, and by so doing unquestionably encouraged Rees in his exploits of espionage.

Regulating the Reeses' type of journalism poses a much greater dilemma. In writing *Information Digest*, they intruded unnecessarily on the privacy and the right to political activity of others, and surely their reporting tactics explored the margins of the law and professional ethics. If John Rees does manage to convince the court that his newsletter was truly a journalistic enterprise, the precedent for similar forays into "investigative journalism" would be hard for other right-wing moles to resist. □

Peacock Throne

(Continued from Front Cover)

mained unconvinced of the Shah's newly adopted humanitarian concerns. The small, spontaneous demonstrations that broke out in isolated spots around the country a year ago have coalesced into a massive resistance movement encompassing virtually every sector of the society. Full-scale uprisings, often evincing considerable planning and coordina-

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tion, have taken place in every major city as well as in the small towns and villages.

Government officials described the August 11th uprising in Isfahan as most serious up to that date. Armed brigades merged with large groups of demonstrators, returning the fire of police and army units sent into the city to quell the protests. *Kayhan International*, a Tehran daily, reported that 200 military vehicles were set afire, and a military spokesman interviewed on Iranian radio justified the police and army intervention by claiming that the crowds "might have destroyed the whole city" if the troops had not stopped them. For the first time since 1953, the regime formally imposed martial law on the city, as well as on ten other towns hit by serious protests. A government team sent in to investigate the Isfahan uprising reported that "most of [the city's 700,000] people" had participated in the unprecedented revolt.

The August 19th Abadan theatre massacre, in which more than 400 people were burned alive inside a flaming, gasoline-soaked movie house, followed release of the team's findings by less than a week. Headlines around the world blamed the atrocity on "fanatical Islamic traditionalists opposed to government reforms," but domestic papers hesitated to assign guilt for the blaze in the wake of immediate, widespread accusations that the government itself had arranged the massacre to provide a pretext for a crackdown on the growing opposition. When it was learned that the theatre was featuring a Parsi film, famous for its thinly veiled criticism of the Pahlavi regime, that the police on the scene had prevented passers-by from going to the aid of the victims, and that fire crews stationed just five blocks away and considered among the best in the Middle East had arrived late, improperly equipped, and with insufficient water supplies, the regime was forced to call out its tanks and troops to put down yet another series of massive demonstrations and riots.

This time, however, the protests could not be stopped, even temporarily, by the use of force. As disorder spread across the country, the regime realized for the first time that it faced a serious challenge and hastily announced a list of "concessions." Jamshid Amouzegar, the aggressive, Western-oriented Prime Minister, was replaced by Sharif Emmami, a lackluster member of the "old guard" with close ties to the conservative wing of the religious establishment. Emmami promptly legalized the formation of "loyal" opposition parties, banned gambling, and reinstated the traditional Shiite calendar which had been changed by royal edict just two years ago to coincide with the founding of the Persian Empire.

The reforms, symbolic moves that changed nothing of substance, only further enraged the resistance movement. In desperation, the regime declared martial law in at least twelve cities, banned all "unauthorized demonstrations," and ordered its troops to open fire on protesters who refused to obey the restrictions. Iranian officials say eighty-six